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Gender and Transformation
Reading, Women, and Gender in Ovid’s
Metamorphoses
Alison Sharrock

Readers and Reading

Ovid’s poetry has had, over the centuries, a remarkable ability to elicit and encompass different responses.¹ The Metamorphoses, with its self-referential instability and its extraordinary generic innovation, has so many ‘further voices’ that it may seem to lack any fixed centre to which those voices can be ‘further’.² Inevitably, it being in the nature of reading, scholars have sought such fixity in many aspects of the poem, both thematic (love, art, metamorphosis itself) and structural (Otis’ triadic structure, chronological movement ab origine mundi ad mea tempora), but it is in the poem’s nature also to resist such drives.³ Its very multiplicity, in characters, narrators, generic interactions, and even tone, together with infection from the poet’s wider elegiac context, has meant that women in the Metamorphoses have received more attention than in other epics, while ‘Ovid’ has been regarded as ‘sympathetic to women’ even when such an attitude was an act of chivalry rather than a sign of heightened sensitivity and gender-consciousness.⁴ Such is the material I seek to explore in this chapter: what are the possibilities

¹ It is customary to refer, disparagingly, to the tradition of ‘Ovide moralisé’ to illustrate the extent of this range. I would suggest, rather, that such readings are perfectly valid appropriations of the text for the purposes of the interpreters’ context—just as I hope is mine to its.
² On this wide-ranging subject, Segal (2005) xxii–iii says (in my re-translation): ‘the Ovidian body in the Metamorphoses can be compared to the carnivalesque body of Mikhail Bakhtin, because it is characterised by fluidity more than by stability, by porosity and the presence of cracks rather than by impenetrable barriers’. At the furthest extreme, Solodow (1988) 38: ‘there is basically a single narrator throughout, who is Ovid himself’, although this does not undermine his appreciation of the fluidity of the poem. Barchiesi (2001) chapter 3 is an important contribution to the peculiar type of polyphony in epic singularity presented by the Metamorphoses. See for example page 49: ‘the polyphony of the Metamorphoses does not consist in the separation of narrative voices, but in an alternation among registers directly controlled by the single narrator’s voice, according to an exhibitionary logic’. See also Barchiesi (2002).
⁴ Keith (2000) is unusual in the extent of attention she gives to epic women. An example of reading Ovid as sympathetic to women is Curran (1978).
when we read the poem with the benefit of modern ideals of reformed masculinity, contemporary gender theory, and the very recent far greater visibility of transgender identities and behaviours? This paper will look at the stability or otherwise of gender-categories in the poem, at some of its female characters and the processes of responding to them, and thereby at the extent of flexibility available to the (modern) reader in her, or his, interpretation.

‘Gender’ and ‘women’ are my subject matter, while my argument relates to the nature of reading. A simplistic expression of my case would be that there are many valid readings. This hardly surprising or innovative argument masks a difficult but important issue in what I would like to call the ethics of interpretation. Many readings might be valid, but not all are helpful. Indeed, it is an inevitable consequence of the doctrine of multiplicity and situatedness in reading that it is not possible to claim, for example, that the fascist appropriation of Virgil is simply invalid: rather, I suggest, it is morally wrong. Reading—that is, literary interpretation—has a moral aspect in the same way as does all communication. While I ascribe to the view that the ‘author’s intention’ should not (and for good theoretical reasons cannot) be the limit of the meaning of a text, a risk in anti-intentionalist criticism is that it might exonerate the author from all responsibility for what he or she says. This, indeed, is a sleight of hand Ovid himself attempts in exile, when he develops the trope of disconnection between literature and life—in the face, be it noted, of a crash between the two—into a full-scale denial of responsibility for what he writes. Ovid’s claims that it isn’t his fault if Roman women read what isn’t meant for them, that he had offered trigger warnings, and that it’s all made up anyway, are part of a complex game—though perhaps it is Russian roulette—about literature, reading, crime and punishment throughout the exile. It is, in essence, the same argument as that which would deny any negative effect from violent videogames and Internet pornography. What does it mean to claim that your poetry or other production has no effect? Is it possible to deny all responsibility for it? Although an author cannot have total control of the meaning of his/her work, the latter tenet should not be allowed to function as a get-out clause for the former.

I would suggest that this same point applies to what we do as modern scholars of ancient texts, since critics are writers as well as readers, both in the sense that

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5 By the claim in this sentence, I intend a cryptic allusion to St Paul, 1 Corinthians 10.23.

6 I develop thoughts about the nature of authorship and readership, particularly as regards Classics, in Sharrock (forthcoming). Derrida’s (1988) deconstructive defence of De Man is a classic instance of the problem.

7 Catullus offers nice instantiations of the trope, for example in poem 16, where the contention that *castum esse decet pium poetam ipsum*, [but] *uersiculos nihil necesse est* (4–6) is surrounded by threats of very physical (but metaphorical?) aggression against naive readers unable to appreciate the point, on which see Fitzgerald (1995) 49–53.


9 On this topic with regard to ancient texts, see O’Rourke (2018) 111 and his n. 4.
they create new (critical) texts and in that their critical writing is crucial in constructing the ancient text for the modern reader. There is, therefore, also a question of responsibility in interpretation. I do not intend to imply that only those interpretations with which I agree are morally responsible, but rather to set my discussion of multiple readings in a context which takes the process of interpretation as a serious endeavour. Indeed, a critical move which I have already made in this piece is itself an example of this problem in the ethics of interpretation and the control of meaning. In order to think about women, in order to avoid the simple equation between human and male, the modern world has found it necessary to use the abstract notion of gender. This paper, like many others in its field of feminist approaches to classical literature, takes it as axiomatic that one can slip comfortably between the categories of ‘women’ and ‘gender’, because the two seem to belong to the same general semantic area. In doing so, however, we are inevitably (and I use the word advisedly) supporting the idea that men are ‘just people’, whereas women are ‘gendered’, to the extent that female characters seem to have more to do with the abstract notion of gender than do male characters—which is a problem.¹⁰ As I do not see any way out of this bind, I am obliged to continue with the feminization of gender, but I hope the reader will bear in mind the possibility—still at some remove from contemporary reality—of an academic discourse in which gender is no more connected with women than it is with men.

My thinking about how (modern) readers respond to gender in the Metamorphoses is informed by two dichotomies in feminist reading: resisting versus releasing approaches and what I propose to call optimistic versus pessimistic assessments of the ancient authorial position. The first, the distinction between ‘resisting’ and ‘releasing’ strategies in feminist interpretation, is a relatively well-known critical practice. In brief, a resisting reading, originally popularized by Judith Fetterley’s eponymous book, is one which identifies the chauvinist, sexist, or other ideology of the text but refuses to play along with it.¹¹ A releasing or recuperative reading, by contrast, opens up possibilities for women’s voices which exist in the text, but which have traditionally been downplayed or ignored by the critical establishment. Much of the important feminist reading of Ovid’s Heroides in recent years has come in this category.¹² My second distinction, between ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ readings, has not been widely theorized in feminist literary criticism, but is widely observable in practice.¹³ What

¹⁰ I do not intend here to undermine the importance of the excellent work that has been done in the last twenty-five years on Roman masculinity and on the gendering of the male, such as Gleason (1995), Keith (1999), and Gunderson (2000), but to note that even such cases are liable to be classed alongside feminist readings that are concerned only with female characters. ‘Gender’, even male gender, still tends to go along with women, and risks being sidelined as such.
¹³ It has, for example, taken the form of wondering whether Ovid or Euripides ‘is a feminist or a misogynist’. Readers will notice my adoption of terminology which has considerable baggage in the
I am calling an ‘optimistic’ reading is when the author, whom for convenience I call Ovid, is regarded as ‘sympathetic to women’, and/or shown to be exposing fluidity of gender against the rigidity of Roman norms, in a way that looks remarkably modern. ‘Pessimistic’ readings, on the other hand, are those which regard Ovid as rather more compromised to his chauvinist social milieu and see him as reifying women and playing out Roman anxieties about masculinity.¹

Such distinctions are susceptible to deconstruction: a common critical move in which the resisting reading is appropriated as optimistic is by presentation of the ancient author as exposing and/or parodying the positions being resisted, rather than being himself responsible for them, while a variation on this strategy is the description of a ‘persona’ who expresses the views resisted, rather than the ‘author’ himself. Such was the move I took in Sharrock (1991), an article which tends towards the optimistic, in that it constructs Ovid as delineating rather than enacting the elegiac objectification of the female as work of art. I read Pygmalion’s creation of the statue as a misogynistic act to be resisted, but I presented Ovid as exposing this process on the part not only of Pygmalion himself but also of the elegiac norm. In contrast to Sharrock (1991), I would regard Sharrock (2015) as a much more pessimistic reading of Ovid: I argue that Virgil gives warrior-women the opportunity to escape from the objectifying and sexualizing Amazon image, while Ovid puts them firmly back into place, and the rest of the Roman epic tradition follows suit from him. Reading Ovid pessimistically in this way is a critical move that is made easier for the modern critic by the fact that another ancient poet (it happens to be Virgil) is lauded as the outstanding precursor of modern feminism.

An example of a strongly pessimistic reading is Richlin’s famous 1992 piece on ‘Reading Ovid’s rapes’, which lacerates the poet for his prurient and objectifying depiction of victims of sexual violence. While most readers do not feel able to go quite so far in principled vituperation, it is partly because of articles like this that it is no longer possible entirely to skate over or explain away the cruelty of the beautiful but disturbing world of the Metamorphoses. Many readers will soften the interpretation of Virgil over the last sixty years. While what I am proposing for Ovid in the sphere of gender does not map simply onto the ‘further voices’ which have been identified for Virgil in (mostly) the political sphere, I feel that there is some value in the comparison, at least as regards the capacity of great works to encompass different readings.

¹ It is entirely possible for both pessimistic and optimistic readings to be feminist. It is no doubt also possible for optimistic and pessimistic readings, in my terms, to be anti-feminist, but I think it would be difficult for them to be uninterested in matters of gender. On the other hand, it might turn out to be useful to expand the terminology into other areas. Obvious candidates would be other matters of what I call ‘situated’ readings, such as those concerned with race or class, but in principle I think the categorization could apply usefully to any reading which is conscious of itself as something more than a paraphrase of the text. It would, moreover, be possible to characterize my ‘pessimistic’ reading as a form of ‘resistance’, while an ‘optimistic’ strategy would be a form of ‘recuperation’, not so much of female voices but of the poet himself.
blow for themselves by presenting Ovid himself as critical of the vices of his world. In addition, there has also been a strand in Ovidian criticism, especially around the turn of the millennium, of a much more extreme optimistic reading, produced partly by using the power of the releasing reader to draw out elements in the text which work against its own master-narrative. Liveley offers a good example of this extreme optimistic reading.¹ She presents her reading as a resisting one, which it certainly is, but it is also a releasing reading in that it gives a voice, metaphorically, to Eburna, the Ivory Woman herself, in the form of an implied agency to control as well as to interpret the world. The suggestion is that (the) Eburna might be manipulating Pygmalion by using the advice in Ovid’s Ars 3. Although I cannot see it as entirely liberating to become the woman of Ars 3, I present (and admire) this interpretation as a strong form of the optimistic reading. Different in detail but similar in optimistic approach is the reading of Salzman-Mitchell on the statue, whom she calls ‘Galatea’,¹ of whom she says (188): ‘Galatea is, then, symbolically the landscape and surface of the poem, into which the narrator and reader intrude. But the gaze of Galatea rejects this reading of Metamorphoses and its fixation of women. Galatea can be seen as a critical reader of the gender stereotypes that Metamorphoses proposes.’

Both the optimistic and the pessimistic responses to the Metamorphoses are valid readings of the poem. Often, however, our readings need to acknowledge both possibilities at once and to accept that the coexistence of objectification and empathy should make it impossible for us either to convict or to exonerate the poet.¹⁷ In the remainder of this chapter, I shall be exploring the disproportionate sympathetic identification with the female victim undergoing metamorphosis, but showing how when the metamorphosis is precisely of gender the masculine is strongly prioritized, to the extent that male characters stand a much better chance than female of escaping from the potentially victimizing and objectifying power of involuntary metamorphosis. My reading will thus be—not on the fence between optimism and pessimism—but displaying both at once. As such, it could be regarded as a classic deconstruction of binaries. But is that morally good enough?

¹⁵ Liveley (1999), especially 207.
¹⁶ Salzman-Mitchell (2005) 184–93. Ovid himself never uses the name Galatea to apply to Pygmalion’s statue, but it is indeed widely used in the tradition. See also Salzman-Mitchell (2005) 161 for a reading of Alcithoe as displaying ‘a certain irreverence toward and independence from the overarching author’.
¹⁷ An important recent contribution to consideration of aesthetics and violence in Ovid is Newlands (2018), where she describes the tension between these two as ‘vital to the dynamic power of Ovid’s poetry’ (177).
Gender and (Lack of) Metamorphosis

It is remarkable, given its historical period, how much Ovid’s epic poem is concerned with this important but problematic categorization that we call ‘gender’. As is well known, the *Metamorphoses* is a poem in flux, where change extends far beyond the literal moments of direct corporeal metamorphosis. Indeed, the very concept of metamorphosis itself is highly fluid within the poem, in the degree of ongoing consciousness, the nature and extent of transformation, the symbolism and meaning of acts of metamorphosis, and the interplays between continuity and change.¹⁸ In such a context, and given the prominent stories of sex-change, it strikes me as particularly surprising that, alongside its predictable preference for male gender, the poem in fact displays considerable stability in gender. I shall argue that although gender is foregrounded in this poem of flux, and is subject to metamorphosis itself, it nonetheless remains as a remarkably stable conceptual bedrock.

If a person is undergoing a major ontological change, such as that between human and vegetable, is it really necessary that the characteristics of human sexual dimorphism should be implicitly carried through to the new form? I suggest that this is, in most cases, exactly what happens in the *Metamorphoses*. From the beginning (so to speak) it was so: when Deucalion and Pyrrha repopulate the world after the flood by throwing stones over their shoulders, Deucalion’s stones produce men and Pyrrha’s produce women.¹⁹ Most metamorphosed characters maintain their original gender as part of their ongoing consciousness, even though the latter varies in the extent of its continuity.²⁰ Io becomes a cow, not a bull—and a beautiful one at that: *inque nitentem / Inachidos uultus mutauerat ille iuuencam / (bos quoque formosa est)* (‘he had changed the face of the daughter of Inachus into a shining heifer (and the cow was also beautiful)’, *Met.* 1.610–12). Actaeon becomes a *ceruus* (3.194), not a *cerua*. Lycaon is a *lupus* (1.237), not a *lupa*. These examples are cases where Latin has distinct words for the male and the female of the species. Ovid, however, draws attention to the ongoing femininity of the *Io-iueuenca*, not only with the juxtaposed alternative designation *bos*, which, unusually for animal nomenclature, can be either masculine or feminine, but also with the adjective *formosa*, a programmatic term in the poem but also here an anthropomorphizing epithet for the pretty cow. The Lycaon-wolf also *ueteris seruat uestigia formae* (‘keeps the traces of his old form’), including grey-white

¹⁸ These issues are widely discussed in the literature. See especially Feldherr (2002).
¹⁹ See Feldherr in this volume for an extensive discussion of the role of gender in this crucial new beginning.
²⁰ I hope to explore in more detail, in a separate publication, the gendered nature of metamorphic destination. For example, almost all metamorphosed trees were once women, whereas the greatest gender equality is with birds. I suggest that what is surprising is not so much that women become trees, but that comparatively speaking so many men become birds. I suspect it may be connected with the capacity for movement.
hair, the violence of his face, his shining eyes, and the same feritatis imago ('appearance of wildness', 1.238–9). It is implied, if again not explicitly stated, that he also maintains his masculinity, in however undesirable a form. He remains Callisto's father, if not approachable as such, at 2.495.⁴¹

To explore further my contention that gender remains stable in most cases of metamorphosis, we will consider a number of examples. When Daphne is 'saved' from Apollo's intended rape by her father helpfully turning her into a tree (thus fixing her to the ground and making it easy for Apollo to catch up), we follow closely the intricate process of transformation, which has been so extraordinarily fertile in visual art thereafter. We are told that once every part of her has been taken over by the tree, nitor unus ('only / one brightness / beauty', 1.552) is all that is left of what had previously been Daphne.⁴² Although the narrator says that the only aspect of continuity between the nymph and the tree is this non-specific nitor, I propose that the narrator is unreliable. Daphne's feminine gender also remains in illa. Both the generic term arbor and most names for tree-species are grammatically feminine, but there is no noun with which the ablative feminine singular illa (1.552) directly agrees here, so the phrase has no option but to be translated 'in her', while the hanc which opens the next line and is the continuing object of Apollo's love likewise maintains a strong sense of its biological as well as grammatical gender.⁴³ More importantly, not only does Apollo continue to treat the Daphne-tree as female, not only does the semantic connection (so often played out in metamorphosis) between parts of the tree and parts of the human body continue after the claim that only one thing remained, but also the consciousness of Daphne appears unchanged. As a tree, she still behaves like a young woman attempting to resist unwelcome sexual advances. There is a deep irony that what she asked her father to do was qua nimium placui, mutando perde figuram ('destroy the appearance / shape by which I have excessively pleased, by changing it', Met. 1.545). She did ask for metamorphosis, a dangerous thing to do in this poem, but she did not get what she asked for, as the continuity in her figura was

²¹ Interactions between grammatical and biological gender will be considered further below.
²² The passage is one of the best known in the poem and has been studied extensively. See especially Hardie (2002b) 45–50. Wheeler (2000) 59–60 glosses nitor (rightly linking it with Io as nitentem . . . iuuencam) with the comment that 'each nymph retains her attractiveness after she is transformed'. Gender is not mentioned explicitly, but seems to be implied exactly as it is by Ovid.
²³ Corbeill (2015) makes a strong case for an ancient Roman fascination with grammatical gender, including its connection with biological sex. On trees, see especially pages 36, 44, 68 ('we have already seen several instances of such nouns, as demonstrated most clearly perhaps by tree names, where native speakers attributed the production of their feminine grammatical gender to a perceived "female" aspect of trees, despite the strictly masculine morphology of the nouns that describe them'), and 89–92 on 'masculine trees'.
exactly what continued to be excessively pleasing to Apollo.⁴ So she does not escape.

This is the first such story in the Metamorphoses (by the time we reach Caenis in book 12, the poem’s rape victims have learnt that a safer request is for a change of biological sex). As with Daphne, so Io’s metamorphosis also leaves her mind unchanged and her behaviour that of a woman whose voice has been cruelly suppressed. There are many other examples of women who undergo a metamorphosis in which they clearly keep their gender—usually with its associated suffering. Callisto the bear, Galanthis the weasel, and the trees Myrrha and Dryope all continue to be defined by their motherhood even when they have lost the physical shape of humanity. Callisto (2.409–530), having been impregnated by Jupiter, is punished for giving birth by Juno, with a torturous metamorphosis into a bear (2.468–84) in which the goddess is vindictively determined to take away from her ‘rival’ the figura (again) which so pleased her own husband (2.474–5). Juno attempts to close down the ambivalence of figura by the metamorphic destination of a horrible bear with its ora . . . deforma (2.481), but is thwarted by the outcome: Callisto’s resultant mental state is one of the most explicitly continuous in the poem, as she continues to behave and think exactly like a deeply troubled and abused human woman (2.485–95). Years later, on seeing her fifteen-year-old son out hunting, she (quae, feminine) restitit Arcade uiso / et cognoscenti similis fuit (‘stopped at the sight of Arcas and was like one recognising’, 2.500–1). The mixed focalization is interesting here: with Arcade uiso we seem to be still inside Callisto’s mind, but with cognoscenti similis it feels more as if we are a sympathetic observer, unless perhaps, after all these years, this one element of human contact is, even to herself, only a shadow of recognition. The other focalizing possibility is Arcas himself, the only actual observer, who might seem for a moment to be thinking ‘that bear is looking at me as if it recognises me’, but if so it is only a fleeting moment, for he immediately runs away and is even about to commit unknowing matricide, until this possibility is forestalled by Jupiter’s catasterization of mother and son (2.505–7). Not only gender, then, but all human relationships have been maintained in Callisto’s metamorphosis.

Myrrha’s motherhood survives her metamorphosis to the extent that she gives birth, in a way which is remarkably human compared with the tradition of her myth, as a tree.⁵ Dryope’s particularly distressing metamorphosis also leaves her still a mother (9.324–93). It is important to note the maternal, indeed puerperal, context of this tale: it is told by the pregnant Iole, in response to Alcumena’s account of her traumatic birthing of Hercules, including the story of the maid-

⁴ As ever in the Metamorphoses, continuity and change are bound up in each other: Daphne’s figura, in the sense of ‘shape’ (OLD 1), has changed, while her figura, in the sense of ‘looks’ (OLD 3c, cf. Met. 10.69), has not changed.

⁵ See Reed’s excellent commentary (2013) on the passage, including other versions of the story in which the birth of Adonis is enabled by a man wielding an axe.
attendant Galanthis who is punished for her cleverness in tricking Lucina into allowing the birth, by being turned into a weasel that gives birth through its mouth (9.280–323).² Dryope, the half-sister of Iole (9.330), is unusual among the rape-victims of the poem in overcoming the trauma of abuse by Apollo to the extent of managing to establish and maintain a happy marriage-relationship (9.331–3).² One day, she is walking the countryside to take garlands to the nymphs; she is not alone (good move—solitude is a major risk), being accompanied by her sister the narrator, and is carrying her nursing baby (9.334–9). Dryope plucks a lotus flower (342) to give to her son (mistake). Although plucking flowers is a risky activity for women in the Metamorphoses, as indeed elsewhere in literature, this example is embedded in the maternal relationship and surrounded by protective sisterhood. But the damage of rape runs deep. Drops of blood fall from the flower and the Lotus tree itself shudders (9.344–5).

At this point, the eyewitness-narrator fills in the back-story of which the participants were ignorant at the time: the nymph Lotis had been turned into this tree when trying to escape from Priapus’ attempts to rape her (9.346–8). We are told that the resultant tree kept the name of the nymph (348), but what we are not explicitly told is nonetheless also clear: she keeps her female gender and the psychological damage from her experience. Tragically, she also passes it on, causing the innocent Dryope to be turned also into—most unusually—the same kind of tree.² The blood dripping from the lotus flower seems to suggest a

² Here is another example of continuity which includes not just gender but the highly sex-specific action of giving birth. Although the story claims that Galanthis is punished in her mouth because it was by means of her deceitful mouth that she tricked the goddess (and, the reader might note, laughed at her), it is no accident that the result is a perversion of birth, not a direct perversion of speech (though it is implicitly that also). On mothers in the Metamorphoses, see Lateiner (2006).

² Kenney (2011) 431 says that the brief, parenthetical allusion to the earlier rape is made only to indicate that Dryope’s baby is the son of Apollo, not of Andraemon, but I would say that Ovid is deliberately playing down any question of offspring from the rape. In Antoninus Liberalis’ account (AL 32), although there is mention of the marriage to Andraemon after the rape and before the birth, the marital relationship plays no further role in the story. Dryope’s metamorphosis (if so it is) does not take place until her son Amphissus is old enough to be king and to have founded a sanctuary to Apollo. Then, in Celoria’s translation of Antoninus (1992) 91: ‘as Dryope was approaching that temple, the hamadryad nymphs gathered her up affectionately and hid her in the woods. In her place they caused a poplar to appear out of the ground. Beside it they made a spring to gush forth. Dryope was changed from mortal to nymph.’ Amphissus then set up a shrine to the nymphs, ‘in honour of the favour shown to his mother’. There follows an action for women not being present at the associated foot-race, which is that ‘two maidens told local people that Dryope had been snatched away by the nymphs. The nymphs were angry at this and turned the maidens into pines.’ Antoninus states Nicander as his source. We can see, then, that Ovid’s tale is quite different as regards the relationships involved. On the other hand, Ovid has downplayed the problem of the baby’s parentage to a remarkable degree, for example by not including any complaint on that score to the god on the very vocal Dryope’s part, and by not allowing the issue to do any harm to the relationship between Dryope and Andraemon. This, I suggest, has the effect of creating a story in which family love and a good relationship manages, at least until a further disaster occurs, to overcome the trauma of abuse.

² That is, if we read loton at 365, in keeping with manuscripts, when Iole points to the tree in response to Dryope’s husband and father looking for her. Kenney (2011) 434 (following Tarrant in the OCT (2004), who obelizes and comments uix sanum) says that this reading is impossible, because the Lotus is the one type of tree which Dryope certainly cannot become. On the problem of the type of tree,
bizarrely incomplete metamorphosis, rather than a continuation of the common trope linking human and dendrological body parts.²⁹ Perhaps it also alludes to the physical wound of rape. Despite the fact that this wound was narrowly avoided in Lotis’ case, and seems to have been healed by family love in Dryope’s, nonetheless it breaks out again at this moment of stress. Dryope’s metamorphosis is set in the context of that continuing family love: son (356–8), sister (359–62), and husband and father together³⁰ (363–6), are present but they are helpless to help her. What these relationships do offer her, however, is an unusual opportunity, even as the bark is growing over her, to speak—for a full twenty lines (371–91). She asks her family to enable her to continue in her role as mother, by bringing the child to visit his mother-tree and teaching him to be aware of her imprisoned identity. She also wants to ensure that he never plucks any flowers (380–1). I am tempted to suggest that the mother is begging her family to ensure that the child does not grow up to be a rapist.³¹ This is followed by words of loving farewell, in which that to the man called care...coniunx comes first (9.382). As such, then, Dryope has maintained both female gender and feminine roles after metamorphosis.

Sympathy and Empathy in Moments of Transformation

Such emotive narratives of transformation are a hallmark of the poem. My argument in this section is that it is predominantly the female characters with whom the reader is invited to empathize strongly during the process of metamorphosis. I would suggest that the poem empathizes more with women than with men in all its aspects (for example, in the well-known psychological soliloquies of Medea and of Scylla, daughter of Nisus), but the point I am aiming to make here is more specific: it is particularly the connection between the process of metamorphosis and empathy with the victim’s perspective which I argue correlates significantly with female gender. While there are indeed male characters whose point of view is explored by the narrative, there are relatively few such characters

²⁹ See Gowers (2005) esp. 335–7 on the connection between humans and trees in Roman thought. The line cannot, however, avoid a reference also to Polydorus, as noted by the commentators: Kenney (2011) 432, Bömer (1977) 382 and Anderson (1972) 440.
³⁰ Line 363 hints at Lucretia, as Bömer (1977) 386 notes. For my purposes, crucial is the construction of Dryope within a loving and functional family.
³¹ Plucking flowers notoriously prefigures potential rape, as for example for Proserpina (Met. 5.392), but that itself is, at least in part, because the action of picking flowers acts metaphorically for defloration, as in Catullus 62.39–47.
with whom the reader is encouraged to identify during the actual process of metamorphosis. For this reason, for example, Hippolytus/Virbius does not fit into the category of those whose point of view is explored in transformation, because the extended description is of his death, rather than his revivification and metamorphosis into a minor deity, the narrative of which at 15.533–44 barely constitutes a metamorphosis.³²

This argument about the predominantly female focalization of transformation applies not only to the obvious cases of Daphne, Dryope, the Heliades, Io, Callisto, Myrrha, Ocyroe, and so on, but even to negatively-portrayed women such as Aglauros. This unlovely character was one of three daughters of Cecrops, the loveliest of whom, Herse, caught the eye of Mercury in Book 2. As he approached the girls’ bedrooms, Aglauros intercepted the god, who asked for her support in his courtship. She, however, demanded gold of great weight for her services (2.570). The situation annoyed Minerva, who was already angry with Aglauros and remembered that the girl had disobeyed the goddess’ instruction not to look at the contents of the sacred basket which she had entrusted to the three daughters of Cecrops (the baby Erichthonius). Minerva decided to enlist the help of one of Ovid’s magnificent personifications, Envy, to torture Aglauros with thoughts of her sister’s fortune (2.760–86).³³ This is horribly successful. When Aglauros tries to block Mercury from entering her sister’s bedroom, she makes the (risky) threat that she will not move from that spot until she has repulsed him (2.817), which Mercury promptly literalizes by turning her to stone. Despite the fact that Aglauros is an unpleasant character and partakes also in the supreme nastiness of the personified Invidia, nonetheless we enter into the horror of her transformation (2.819–32). This is a remarkable representation of a woman’s subjectivity, offered to us in the case of a character with whom we might not inherently want to sympathize. The situation, reinforced by the example in the next paragraph, seems to me to suggest that there is something markedly gendered about metamorphosis.

Similar is the case of the Thracian women who witnessed³⁴ the murder of Orpheus being turned into trees by Bacchus. The account of the metamorphosis (11.67–84) has the hallmarks of an Ovidian tree-transformation, with its strong focalization through the victim, but in place of the semantic slippage between body-parts and tree-parts which is the main focus elsewhere, in this case stress is placed on the victims being painfully bound (ironically instigated by Bacchus

³² Actaeon will be considered briefly later. ³³ Hardie (2002b) 231–8, esp. 236.
³⁴ Reed (2013) 315 says that the phrase quae uidere nefas (11.70) is not restrictive and refers to all the women. He suggests that seeing here implies ‘being guilty of’ in the sense that all those who were present and saw the action participated in it at different levels. I would suggest, however, that the phrase adds to the vindictiveness of Bacchus in this passage, identified by Reed. It might also pick up again on another group of rampant Bacchants who committed sparagmos on a man, in that uidere nefas was what Pentheus was seeking to do (nefas from his point of view) when they caught him.
Lyaeus, the loosener, 11.67). The passage has a number of marked features: metamorphosis of the murderers of Orpheus is not attested elsewhere;³⁵ the metamorphic destination is generic trees, rather than specific species;³⁶ the account contains a simile within the metamorphic description, thus drawing on the connection between imagery and metamorphosis almost to the extent of implying a secondary conceptual metamorphosis into birds—trapped ones (72–5).³⁷ The crucial point for me is the extent to which this description of transformation is extended and sympathetically presented from the point of view of the women, for fifteen lines through their eyes (quae uidere nefas, ‘those who saw the crime’, 70, thus taking on new significance). Only at its end does the point of view move from verbs in which the women are the agents (quaerit, aspicit, conata . . . plangere, percussit), through ‘impersonal’ verbs in which the body-parts and tree-substance become subjects and complements (fiunt, sunt—note also the chiasmatic arrangement of pectus . . . robora / robora . . . umeri), and finally to an intrusive appeal to the reader to observe the semantic slippage of trees and humans as it stabilizes on trees (11.83–4).³⁸

What does it mean for Ovid to give so much space and attention to the transformation of women? I hope that the ‘meaning’ received by my readers is appreciation for the sensitivity of the accounts and the remarkable foregrounding of women’s subjective experience. That would be the optimistic reading which I do indeed aim to share. On the other hand, these highly developed accounts of the moment of metamorphosis also enact the loss of voice, personality, identity, often movement, and capacity for deliberate action which the transformation entails. The extraordinary stress on the loss of voice in metamorphosis is epitomized by the severed tongue of Philomela, which Enterline insightfully takes as the controlling image of her study.³⁹ Similar (if less pornographically violent) struggles with communication are encountered by the metamorphosed Daphne (whose

³⁵ See Reed (2013) 314. For the interactions between Orphic, Apollonian, and Bacchic traditions in this passage, see also his page 304.

³⁶ It is thereby particularly far removed from any aetion, although there is presumably some additional irony in the women-trees adding to the forest which listened to Orpheus’ song. On the connection between metamorphosis and aetia see Barchiesi in this volume.

³⁷ On similes and metamorphosis see Barkan (1986) esp. 20–2 and Schmidt (1991). On similes in the Metamorphoses see von Glinski (2012), who gives a good account of the history of the question (2–9). She discusses the death of Orpheus at 21–5. As she rightly points out, the simile of the trapped birds alludes to that used for the killing of the maids in Odyssey 22.468–72, thus (I suggest) enhancing the viciousness of Bacchus’ punishment of the women (although at least Odysseus distinguished different levels of guilt).

³⁸ The final word, putando, as noted by Wheeler (1999) 153, meaning ‘in/by thinking’ also hints at a term uncomfortably appropriate for trees—‘in/by pruning’. This rather gruesome joke extends to the whole phrase as a warning on interaction with trees in this poem: not just ‘be deceived if you thought so’ but also ‘and you wouldn’t [would you?] make the mistake of pruning them’. Be careful how you treat trees in this poem.

naked Apollo appropriates but we cannot interpret, 1.566–7), Myrrha (who cannot call upon Lucina to aid her parturition, 10.506–7), Ocyroe metamorphosed as she speaks (2.655–75), while the voice of Echo, forever unable to initiate any communication (3.359–61), offers a more comfortably aestheticized but equally telling representation of female lack—to the extent that she has become a feminist icon. The other power which women lose disproportionately is movement, from the moment when Daphne’s prayed-for metamorphosis has the effect of stopping her running and enabling Apollo to catch up to the trapped-bird simile discussed above. All these representations could be taken as sympathetic exposure of the damage done to women—but the problem is that they could equally well be enactment and even fetishization of it. The extent of the emphasis on victimhood may perhaps suggest the latter.

But what about men? Men do indeed also lose the powers of speech and movement, so what is my justification for saying that metamorphosis is a form of victimization gendered female? My argument depends on three things: preponderance rather than absolute numbers, emotive identification, and (most problematically) a certain negative feminization which I shall suggest occurs in core categories of metamorphosis. In brief, the argument is that while there are indeed men who are victimized by metamorphosis, they are disproportionately few, disproportionately lacking in subjective identification, and finally some of the cases that do exist also involve certain other power-relations which are effectively (and negatively) ‘feminizing’. I want to suggest, then, that there is a kind of metamorphosis which is damagingly feminizing. There may be a circularity to this argument, but it is a circle from which, I suggest, it is hard to escape.

One of the few examples of a male character whose loss of voice is narrated is Lycaon, who frustra . . . loqui conatur (‘tries in vain to speak’, 1.233), in a description of metamorphosis (1.233–9) dispassionately—or perhaps vindictively—narrated by the tyrannical Jupiter. Cadmus likewise uult plura loqui (‘wants to say more’, 4.586), but is prevented by the forking of his tongue as he becomes a snake. Silenced victim of an outraged deity also is Actaeon, a rare example of a male whose metamorphosis invites close empathy. His story, unusually for a man, includes extensive focalization during the process of metamorphosis itself (3.195–248), a forestalled attempt to bewail his lot (3.201–2), and an equally unsuccessful effort to impose his status as human and master (3.230). My first and most important point about the emotive focalization of the Actaeon story is that it is rare. I would note in addition, however, that as a young huntsman who

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41 Segal (2005), in a valuable discussion of the female body in the Metamorphoses (31–49), draws attention to the immobilization and imprisonment of women, including via metamorphosis (see especially 36).
42 There is some doubt about the text here, but the issue is not significant for my current argument.
falls foul of Diana/Artemis through inadvertent voyeurism, his position is negatively sexualized.

As regards movement, in absolute terms there may be as many men immobilized by metamorphosis as there are women, if one includes all the victims of Perseus’ use of Medusa’s severed head (two hundred, according to 5.209), but rarely do we engage with them subjectively. The brief account (5.205–6) of the amazement of Astyages at the lithification of Aconteus is a case in point: it is captured forever in the ecphrastic topos of astonishment as Astyages suffers the same fate. Phineus himself is turned to stone in an account (5.210–35) which takes his point of view, briefly, but also condemns him from the viewer’s perspective (Perseus’ and, probably, the reader’s) as a cowardly parody of the Turnus of Aen. 12. Similar to this controlling victimization (deserved or otherwise) are a number of other cases of petrification: the luckless bearer of the poisoned cloak to Hercules, Lichas (9.214–29); the yokel Battus, who makes the mistake of promising silence to Mercury by saying that a stone will speak first (2.696), with a predictable result (2.705–7); and the shepherd who is unlucky enough to be asked to resolve a dispute among the gods regarding Ambracia and is turned to stone by one of the losers (13.713–15). All these male human–stones—be it noted—are socially lowly.

In the light of the arguments above, I propose a mechanism for categorizing types of metamorphosis according to the extent to which the transformation is an imposition which more or less painfully limits the activity of its victim: this mechanism forms the basis of the argument for feminization. Excluded from my category of victimized, feminized metamorphoses are apotheoses, shape-changing, and ‘near-misses’ (explained below), all of which are predominantly male, and either actively powerful or at least distanced from victimhood.

Becoming a god is almost entirely reserved for males, ranging from relatively weak characters like Acis or Hippolytus/Virbius through Glaucus to the great heroes of Roman politics (Hercules, Aeneas, Romulus, Aesculapius, Caesar, Augustus—and Ovid), while on the female side Hersilia is allowed to join her husband Romulus among the gods (14.829–51), and victims like Io, Callisto, and Leucothoe eventually gain some form of (relatively passive) divinity. Shape-changing is mostly the province of the gods but includes also Mestra (8.848–74), who is constrained by filial duty, and Periclymenus (12.555–76), the voluntary shape-changer introduced only at his death at the hands of Hercules. ’Near-miss’ transformation is indirect, implied, or distanced metamorphoses such

44 This is the judgement also of Rosati (2009) 159, who describes it as a melodramatic parody.
45 See Reed (2013) 436–7 on the myth of Periclymenus in classical literature. He rightly draws attention to the connection with Mestra and the role of Neptune in both cases. Both these (rare) mortal shape-changers share in the metamorphic qualities of the sea. On shape-changers, see Forbes Irving (1990) 171–94.
as the flower which symbolizes/replaces Narcissus (3.509–10), the mulberry tree which changes colour when touched by the blood of Pyramus (4.125–7), the stream which flows from the tears of those mourning Marsyas (6.392–400), Ariadne’s crown (8.178–82), the block of wood which is coextensive with and in control of the life of Meleager (8.451–7), the blood of Adonis (10.728–39), the snake which is turned to stone to stop it attacking Orpheus’ severed head (11.56–60), the flower that commemorates Ajax (13.394–8), the birds in honour of Memnon (13.600–16). It will be noted that, except for Ariadne’s crown, all the examples of near-misses which I have given are of or related to male characters. The most obvious further female examples are secondary to the primary tree-metamorphosis in the case of the tears of the Heliades (2.364–6) and Myrrha (10.500–2). So near-misses, apotheoses, and shape-changers are predominantly male.

Transformations that do not fall into the categories just mentioned are overwhelmingly those in which the metamorphosed being is most forcefully constructed as a victim. Many cases are punishment (deserved or otherwise), but even when these transformations are rescue or even reward, nonetheless they fix the transformed person in a passive, subordinate, and actually or potentially abused position. And they are predominantly female. I suggest, therefore, that metamorphosis thus construed is an instantiation of abusive power, of which women are predominantly the victims. In addition to these women, there are also certain categories of male victims who are ‘feminized’ by the process. Actaeon belongs to that category, as do Lichas and Phineus, but the vast majority of the victims with whom the reader is encouraged to identify are female. Pessimistically, I am inclined to suspect that if there is any way of telling such stories without disempowering and negatively feminizing the victims, Ovid’s Metamorphoses has not found it.

**Metamorphosis of Gender (One-way Only)**

In the second section of this paper, I argued that gender is remarkably stable in the process of metamorphosis, while the third suggested that the poem both encourages empathy with female victims and also victimizes them. But what happens when the transformation is precisely in the matter of gender? My claim regarding stability of gender needs to be considered against the directly transsexual stories, while the outcome of this consideration may throw further light on the issue of empathy and victimization. On a maximalist view, there are six accounts of sex changes.

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47 Important in discussion of sex-changes and related phenomena in the ancient world is Brisson (2002), but see Corbeill (2015) 151 for careful nuancing of the significance of hermaphrodites in
change in the poem, but two of these are unenlightening for my purposes. First, Mestra is a shape-changer who takes on multiple guises, including some play about gender, as well as a horse and other animals, but her brief moment as a fisherman is not really significant as a sex change, despite her clever wordplay at 8.867–8 (quoted in the footnote at the end of this sentence), while the defensive power granted by her shape-shifting is one of general unrecognizability rather than gendered invulnerability. 48 Second is Sithon, whose story is among those rejected by the Minyad Alcithoe as too common for her to sing. According to Lateiner’s account of mimetic syntax, the description modo uir modo femina (4.280) implies repeated action, 49 but the absence of any further development by Ovid means that this character cannot contribute very much to a reading of transsexuality in the poem. 50 Of the remaining four, Hermaphroditus is distressed to change from (very young) man to intersex person, Tiresias claims that women enjoy sex more than men but nonetheless clearly prefers to be a man, while Caenis and Iphis are both people born as women whose lives are immeasurably improved by the divine gift of transsexuality. A point to note about these stories is a very strong preference for male gender on the part of characters. 51 It seems that for all Ovid’s sensitivity to matters of gender, in ways that can be read as remarkably modern, nonetheless masculinity always trumps femininity in the poem.

To put a little more flesh on this claim, we will need to examine each of these stories briefly. The case is particularly clear, although suppressed by the poet, for Hermaphroditus. It is a story, as is well known, shot through with interplays and complexities of gender, even before the fateful embrace in Salmacis’ pool. 52 Once

Roman culture. See also Forbes Irving (1990) chapter 7. Regarding Metamorphoses, see also Lateiner (2009).

48 I am grateful for this formulation to the anonymous reader, who helpfully points out that Mestra is in a sense a doublet for Caenis, as rape victim of Neptune. In both cases, the god responds to the woman’s request for deliverance from further victimization through the loss of her female form. On the Mestra myth, see Forbes Irving (1990) 149. Mestra-the-fisherman plays explicitly with gender when claiming that nemo . . . litore in isto / me tamen excepto nec femina constitit ulla. At 8.873, Mestra becomes equa (feminine, where there would have been a choice), ales (grammatically feminine), bos (masculine or feminine), and then ceruus (masculine where there would have been a choice). I am generally averse to arguments from meter, in that other words are available, but this would be the easiest explanation for equa and ceruus.

49 Lateiner (1990) 226. He comments: ‘The pattern of repeated words produces a continuity of identity on the verbal level reporting the metamorphic action, a parallelism that adds meaning, not merely rhetorical emphasis.’ I am not sure whether the claim is relevant to the character’s underlying identity separate from her/his gender.

50 One further case of sex-change in the poem occurs in Pythagoras’ list of examples of ‘natural’ changes: the hyena quae modo femina tergo / passa marem est, nunc esse marem miremur (15.409–10).

51 Fantham (2004) 61 also notes the preference for male gender in the stories of transsexuality. See also Keith (1999), Segal (2005) 49–54.

the nymph’s ill-judged prayer is granted and the two become one flesh (in not at all the way she meant⁵³), the female element disappears completely. The Hermaphroditus who leaves the pool is deeply angry about the effect on his body, but there seems to have been no effect at all on his mind, personality, or sense of self. The ‘one’ that the two have become is all him.⁵⁴ Indeed, the story leaves the grotesque impression that the only remaining traces of Salmacis are in the female sexual organs which now form part of Hermaphroditus. It is true that his *membra* are also *mollita* and he speaks *uoce* no longer *uirili* (4.381–2), but given his youthful, ephebic status at the beginning of the passage and the extreme infectiousness of any one aspect of damage to masculinity, these elements are hardly traces of the individual person who was Salmacis.⁵⁵ While agreeing with Romano that the opposition between ‘Hermaphroditus the inventor of marriage and Hermaphroditus the victim of rape’ shows ‘the nature of Ovid’s appropriation’, I am uncomfortable with the suggestion that ‘Hermaphroditus’ rape stands out both for its reversing of roles, making the nymph the aggressor, and for the simple fact that it is at last a rape that ends, in a manner of speaking, with a ‘successful coupling’.⁵⁶ Even with the qualification, surely there is nothing successful about Salmacis’ total loss of identity. By comparison, many male rapes are ‘successful couplings’ in that intercourse happens and produces pregnancy. It causes trauma to the victim, but not the annihilation which Salmacis suffers. I would suggest that at the end of this story it is no longer Hermaphroditus but Salmacis who is the victim.

Regarding Tiresias (3.322–31), I am not the first to note that during the female years Tiresias behaves in exactly the same way as in the male years. In her important article on the story, Liveley is particularly interested in Juno’s response to the ‘jokey argument’, but she also describes the way in which Tiresias is a man even when he is a woman.⁵⁷ It is not difficult to see that the staff with which Tiresias twice violates a pair of copulating stakes (3.325) is a phallic symbol, while there is no feminine adjective applied to Tiresias during his period as a woman. In

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⁵³ Keith (1999) 220 takes the outcome of the embrace as the female narrator Alcithoe’s gift to Salmacis, but I would read her prayer at 4.371–2 as nothing but a wish for a permanent relationship and the kind of metaphorical ‘oneness’ of sexual intercourse, a wish that is cruelly interpreted by the gods who fuse the two bodies.

⁵⁴ Keith (1999): ‘paradigmatic of the erasure of female subjectivity’ (though this is only one of her possible readings).


⁵⁷ Liveley (2003) 157. She suggests that Juno’s anger could be at Tiresias daring to speak for women, and at Jupiter’s expectation that she, Juno, is Woman rather than expressing her own, subjective, experience (for which Jupiter should bear a lot of responsibility). Balsley (2010) makes a similar suggestion, that Juno’s anger is because ‘her attitude towards the pleasures of sex is being debated and determined by two men, one of whom has no business being involved in the matter whatsoever, and the other of whom has permitted this man to render such an opinion’. I am grateful to Elena Giusti for giving me advance sight of her article (2018), which powerfully exposes not only the chauvinism of Tiresias but also its implications for Ovid throughout the corpus.
other accounts of the tale, Tiresias undergoes multiple (six) sex changes, including also changes of life-stage and gendered experiences such as motherhood, but Ovid has not chosen to explore these.⁵⁸ The effect of this, I suggest, is to give us a Tiresias who has no experience of female subjectivity, despite his claims to be able to adjudicate on the matter. The most generous interpretation would be to regard the female Tiresias as an un-transitioned transman, who sees the only way out of his uncomfortable female body to be violence. Be that as it may, he wants to get back to being a man.

The cases of the two straightforward transmen are easier. Iphis, biologically a girl but brought up as a boy, and therefore culturally gendered male, becomes biologically male on her/his wedding day in a rare piece of ‘happy ever after’ in the poem. The story of Iphis and Ianthe could be read as a literalization of ancient maturation-rituals, as an early account of gender dysphoria, or as a lesbian story.⁵⁹ Iphis could be regarded, in modern terms, as a ‘man caught in a woman’s body’, since he lives as (and has been raised as) a man. Her long lament at 9.726–63, however, displays the psychology of a woman, no more masculine than other women who grieve at their erotic situation.⁶⁰ There is nothing in the speech to suggest male subjectivity, so to describe her as ‘psychologically transgendered’ is not, I think, accurate. She wants to be a boy, she is reared as a boy, but as constructed by Ovid she is not a boy caught in a girl’s body. It would be more accurate to call her a girl dressed up as a boy. Ormand rightly draws attention to the remarkable degree of similarity and mutuality between the two lovers, which takes a standard trope of erotic discourse to destructive extremes (as for Narcissus), making any kind of love relationship impossible. He argues that ‘what Iphis finds unthinkable is not the typical Roman category of tribadism (to say nothing of “lesbianism”), but a romance of equal partners’.⁶¹ So, is Ovid pointing out a problem in Roman sexuality that it is so extremely dependent on inequality? Or is he overwhelmingly privileging conformist relationships and male gender? I am inclined to suspect the latter, though both readings are available.

In the story of Caenis, the privileging of male gender is extreme, but comprehensible from a psychological point of view and given the realities of masculinist society. Caenis chooses wisely when offered a gift in recompense for the rape of her virginity by Neptune—she asks to be a man (12.201–3). One might object that

⁵⁸ See Barchiesi and Rosati (2007) 171–3, and O’Hara (1996). If O’Hara’s reconstruction of ‘Sostratus’ poem’ is right, the stories available to Ovid regarding both Hermaphroditus and Tiresias show the extent to which he has chosen to focus on disruptions to male subjectivity in his accounts.
⁶⁰ She even knows that she must use feminine adjectives of herself (745–8), which, if this were a realist text, would be odd. Ovidian grammar usually maintains the underlying gender (or skirts the issue), but an exception is mirata est of Vertumnus disguised as an old woman, Met. 14.657.
her prayer is *femina ne sim* ‘not to be a woman’ rather than ‘to be a man’, but the implications of *femina* stress gender rather than humanity. Moreover, in the circumstances her prayer *tale pati . . . posse nihil* (‘not to be able to suffer such a thing’) must remind the reader of the notorious phrase for undergoing sexual penetration, *muliebria pati*. Neptune makes clear his and Ovid’s understanding of the implications of the wish, not only by immediately granting her the external signs of masculinity, but also by making her invulnerable to weapons (12.203–7).

The context for the story within the poem is another invulnerable warrior, Cyncus, who caused Achilles considerable annoyance by refusing to die in the normal way before Troy. Once he had finally been strangled with his own helmetstraps and battered to death by the irate superhero (12.132–43), Cyncus was turned into his eponymous bird, the swan. In a break in the war, Nestor comforts the confused Achilles with the account of an earlier impermeable warrior, Caeneus, whose inviolability was all the more remarkable because *femina natus erat* (‘he was born a woman’, 12.175).\(^6\) Invulnerable warriors are a known phenomenon in early Greek and Indo-European mythology, but rarely are they so explicitly linked to gender and sexual penetration.\(^6\) The new man Caeneus rejoices in the gift and happily pursues a career as a male warrior (12.208–9). His death finally comes about during the battle of Centaurs and Lapiths, expansively narrated by Nestor. Caeneus has been taunted by the centaur Latreus with his female origins (12.470–6), followed by the inevitable failure of the centaur’s spear to have any effect, when the Lapith replies with a particularly violent and unpleasant version of pleasure in penetration (12.490–3). This display of masculine prowess calls the attention of all the centaurs onto Caeneus. They uproot trees from the surrounding mountains and pile them on top of him until he is finally suffocated (12.510–21).

What happens next is uncertain (12.522). Some say that Caeneus was pushed right down to the underworld by the weight of trees, but his companions see a bird flying out from the woodpile, a bird which Nestor has never seen before or since (12.526). It is hailed by Mopsus as the metamorphosed form of Caeneus (12.530–1). Does this outcome mean that Caeneus reverts to his birth gender (once *uir*, now *auis . . . unica*)? Virgil certainly had him become female again, in order to join other dead heroines surrounding Dido in the underworld.

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\(^6\) The mix of genders between the subject and predicate is amusing here. It is amusing also, in the Ovidian way, that everyone is immediately amazed at the *monstri nouitate* (175). Although there may be good reasons, including metapoetic ones, to regard the story as novel, Caenis/Caeneus is nonetheless a repeat of Cyncus, down to the metamorphosis into a bird. On the play with novelty in Caeneus, see Ziogas (2013) esp. 182–3, n.9.

Reed argues that the bird is in continuity with Caeneus (flying around his camp) but also with Caenis, in that she has reverted to female gender. He rightly notes, however, that Mopsus does not see it that way, with his masculine vocative Caeneu. I would add that the masculine vocative maxime implies even more strongly that Mopsus regards the bird-Lapith as still male, still greatest. A bird, after all, is grammatically feminine, just as proles takes a feminine adjective, even when referring in patronymic style to a (heroic) male offspring, as frequently in Ovid and Virgil. Perhaps the best explanation would be that from Mopsus’ point of view Caeneus is still Caeneus, but for the author/reader the grammatically feminine auis unica draws attention to the interplays of gender. If, as seems likely, the feminization is designed to remind us of the Aeneid passage, we might well think that the Lapith would be much better off as Caeneus-bird than as Caenis among the suffering underworld heroines. The lines are also pleasing and satisfying to the reader, especially if it is remembered that Nestor began by describing Cycnus as unicus (12.169). The story tells us that it is much better to be a man. Is that true even if it makes you push weapons up to the hilt into other people’s bodies and twist them round to cause maximum damage? Both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ are answers which the poem makes open to the reader. Nonetheless, the optimist in me regards the story as remarkable in exposing the psychological as well as physical damage done to the victim.

Ovid provides what seem to be some highly sensitive and empathetic representations of women’s subjectivity, but only in negative contexts. This is in part because adversity makes better stories, but the joy in the poem is not evenly distributed. No one in the poem rejoices in the new-found experience of being a woman. The nearest we see to a male being who plays out a female role is when a god disguises himself as an old woman or a goddess in order to gain nefarious access to a young woman. As Raval says: ‘Ovidian tales of male-to-female cross-dressing reassert the masculine power of the transvestite hero or god and thus reinforce a gender binary.’ Moreover, they also impose a hierarchy. Most if not all non-fictional accounts of transsexuality in antiquity are also of female-to-male transition, for example Pliny NH 7.34, Phlegon of Tralles Mirabilia 5. One might want to say that Ovid is exposing this tendency in his society, but unfortunately that there is nothing to suggest that it might be an exposure rather than enactment. Be that as it may, the privileging of male gender in the poem plays out

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64 Ziogas (2013) 188–9 reads the reversion as a Virgilian invention. 65 Reed (2013) 436.
66 There are many examples, including in the Book 12 version of Cycnus (and the first version of Cycnus, though with a different nomenclature for the adjective, 2.367) as Neptunia proles, echoing examples of that phrasing in the Aeneid, on which see Reed (2013) 391. proles plus feminine adjective is also used of Caenis herself in the opening of her story, Clara decore fuit proles Elateia Caenis, 12.189.
67 Raval (2002) 151. She also points out that in the poem men-as-women do not actually perform the female gender, but rather parody it. Much of her argument is what I would describe as pessimistic, although she may (consciously or not) be making use of the comforting trope whereby the ancient author is said to be ‘comment[ing] explicitly on the constructed nature of gender identities’ (152).
masculine superiority even more deeply than more obviously masculinist stories, by making it seem natural.

**Conclusion**

Although it is only in recent years that readers, including readers of Latin poetry, have become acutely sensitive to gender-difference and gender-fluidity, the *Metamorphoses* provides an extraordinary wealth of material for a reader who is so sensitized, such that it seems hard to imagine that these things are not in some sense intentionally seeded in the poem. Among my goals in reading Ovid’s poetry is to draw out the female consciousness, subjectivity, and experiences in the texts, which have been suppressed by forces also in the texts, and to explore the power dynamics and gendered dynamics of Ovid’s fictional world. Whether or not we are happy to fix the blame for violence, fetishization, and oppression on a persona or a fictional character, thus exonerating ‘the poet himself’, releasing these elements out into the open is a reading, at once both pessimistic and optimistic.